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Greening the Government

By adopting environmentally-friendly purchasing initiatives, contracting officers can help create jobs for people with disabilities.

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The recent energy crisis in California has been both a humbling and sobering experience for all Americans. California is the sixth largest economy *in the world*—surpassing many independent nations—and here the Golden State is struggling just to keep the lights on.

At this point you are probably wondering what the California energy crisis has to do with acquisition and contract professionals. At the same time, you may be curious as to how the energy crisis ties in with creating jobs for individuals with disabilities. Well, the answers to these questions demonstrate how interrelated procurement, environmental and employment issues can be. You may be surprised to learn how contracting professionals' collective buying decisions have a tremendous impact on both conserving our natural resources and creating jobs for individuals with disabilities.

Greening the Government

We are fortunate that our federal government has acknowledged the relationship between spending/consuming and saving/preserving our natural resources. It is simply a matter of good economic sense to get the most “bang-for-the-buck” when it comes to our resources, whether we are talking about raw materials or human or natural resources. Common sense tells us that when good environmental practices are implemented in government and private business operations, everyone wins. The government or business operator wins by saving money on utility bills, reduced health care and liability costs, increased productivity, and lower “dumping” and hazardous waste disposal fees. Employees win by enjoying the benefits of breathing cleaner air, which may reduce the intensity of or even eliminate poor Indoor Air Quality (IAQ)-related respiratory ailments, such as asthma and bronchitis. Society also wins when healthier employees increase productivity and reduce strain on the nation's healthcare system.

As the largest purchaser of goods and services in the nation (and quite possibly the world), the U.S. federal government spends over \$200 billion annually on goods and services.ⁱ At the same time, the government has an obligation to U.S. citizens to use this purchasing power prudently by purchasing quality goods and services at reasonable prices that help the government operate and further agency missions. The government flexes its purchasing muscle by establishing certain regulations and/or that will have a positive impact on the commercial marketplace. Such is the case in federal “Greening the Government” initiatives, whereby the government exercises its buying power to accomplish environmental goals, including making federal work spaces cleaner, safer and healthier environments.

Federal contracting professionals are the key in the equation. Today, in addition to considering traditional factors such as price, availability and performance, federal purchasers are also considering environmental attributes in making purchasing decisions. The impact of their actions is resonating across the nation as suppliers to the federal workforce change the way they do business to meet customer demand.

Essentially, the national policy is to take a preventive approach towards pollution, to stop or stem the flow of solid waste to our nation's landfills. At the same time, by leveraging its purchasing power, the government can help stimulate market demand for products manufactured using new technology that incorporates recycled materials such as paper and plastic. These materials otherwise end up in our nation's landfills. To accomplish its mission, the government is also directing agencies to increase purchases of environmentally preferable products (EPP) and services. Executive Order 13101, "Greening the Government Through Waste Prevention Recycling and Federal Acquisition," defines EPP products and services as those "products and services that have a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared with competing products or services that serve the same purpose." The product or service comparison may consider raw materials acquisition, production, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, reuse, operation, maintenance, or disposal.

The JWOD Program

The Javits-Wagner-O'Day (JWOD) Program is a unique public-private socioeconomic initiative. Acknowledging that individuals who are blind may have a difficult time securing employment, Congress passed the Wagner-O'Day Act in 1938, directing Federal agencies to buy certain commodities from nonprofit agencies employing blind individuals. The law was amended in 1972 under the leadership of Senator Jacob Javits, to include nonprofit agencies that employ individuals with a range of disabilities and to include the provision of services. By law, the JWOD Program is a mandatory source of certain products and services to the federal government. Essentially, the law directs federal agencies to purchase certain supplies and services furnished by nonprofit agencies that employ individuals who are blind or have other severe disabilities.

The partners in the JWOD Program include the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled (Committee), National Industries for the Blind (NIB), NISH (serving people with a range of disabilities), and JWOD-associated nonprofit agencies located across the nation. The Committee—a small independent Federal agency that oversees the JWOD Program—is comprised of 15 members; 11 members represent major federal procuring agencies, while four members are private citizens who represent the interests of individuals with disabilities. The President of the United States appoints all Committee members.

Both NIB and NISH are private nonprofit organizations designated by the Committee under the JWOD Act. The NIB/NISH team assists the Committee by performing technical and other day-to-day operational tasks. NIB and NISH work with more than 600 JWOD-associated nonprofit agencies. It is the local nonprofit agencies such as Goodwill Industries, Lighthouses for the Blind, and Easter Seal Society that employ individuals who are blind or have other severe disabilities and that furnish the products and services to federal customers.

Although the JWOD Program is a mandatory source of supplies and services, it is incumbent upon JWOD participants to furnish the products and services that Federal customers

demand and need to accomplish their respective missions. In recent years, the emphasis in federal procurement has been to “buy green, build green, drive green, be green.” Federal acquisition has embraced the letter and the spirit of various environmental initiatives by purchasing products manufactured using recycled materials. They are including “green” language in their custodial, grounds maintenance, and other service contracts to ensure that contractors use recycled content and EPP and services, as well as follow environmentally-sound practices and procedures in contract performance. Federal fleet managers are using re-refined oil, and retread tires in their fleets, while agencies are analyzing their energy consumption and being creative to conserve energy. For example, at a recent Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management meeting, one presenter explained that turning off computer monitors each evening can save an agency up to \$30.00 per year, per computer. Other energy saving tips include simply lowering lighting requirements in office hallways and unpopulated spaces and removing lights from vending machines.

Meanwhile, federal acquisition professionals are purchasing the Department of Energy’s “Energy-Star” compliant computers and monitors, fax machines and copiers, while stocking their supply cabinets with JWOD paper products that meet federal requirements for postconsumer recycled paper. And when they move into a new space or refurbish current office space, federal customers are purchasing environmentally preferable paint and new “reincarnated” carpet manufactured from carpet nylon previously used in another building. For the federal procurement professional, the changes represent a whole new—or rather “recycled”—way of doing business in the 21st century: New technology, new ideas, old materials.

The JWOD Program is committed to the letter and the spirit of federal environmental initiatives and is partnering with federal agencies to help them accomplish their environmental goals. The JWOD Program has partnered with the White House Task Force on Recycling to stay on top of issues as they relate to products and services the JWOD-associated nonprofit agencies furnish to the government. The Committee believes that as long as JWOD products and services meet federal requirements and preferences for environmental attributes, then we maintain happy customers. Additionally, when JWOD Program products and services meet customer needs, then the Program maintains current jobs while exploring opportunities to grow or create new jobs in accordance with customer demand for individuals who are blind or severely disabled.

In another partnership arrangement, the JWOD Program signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in August 2000. The purpose of the MOA is “for the participants to enter into a partnership to sell and to purchase products and services that have a reduced environmental impact by minimizing solid waste, preventing pollution, using less toxic substances, consuming fewer resources, saving energy, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or that otherwise have a reduced impact as compared with comparable products.” In addition, the participants to the MOA “recognize that the following two goals are mutually supporting: maximizing federal agency purchases of environmentally preferable products and services, and purchasing the same from a mandatory source that generates training and employment opportunities for people who are blind or have other severe disabilities through the federal acquisition process.”

Red, White, Blue and Green

The MOA has resulted in some exciting, innovative work opportunities for individuals with disabilities. One environmental project is a green custodial contract being performed by FedCap, a NISH-associated nonprofit agency in New York City. The project at one of the nation's most venerated and visible national monuments—the Statue of Liberty—calls for the use of environmentally preferable cleaning supplies, as well as the use of process chlorine free recycled paper products. It has been an overwhelming success. In another green venture, Blind Industries and Services of Maryland set up and is operating a unique, environmental office supply store at the DOI main offices in Washington, DC. The store is unique in that all items were screened to ensure that, to the highest degree possible, products would be as environmentally sound as they can be. In addition to providing a convenient location for DOI employees to shop for their office needs, the store created retail-like jobs for blind individuals.

The Future is Now

In response to increasing demand for green products and services, the JWOD Program began a pilot program with Green Seal, an independent, nonprofit organization that sets environmental standards. The project involves testing and evaluating environmental claims and attributes against Green Seal standards. Products that demonstrate environmental integrity are certified and can utilize the “Green Seal” of approval in marketing efforts. The Green Seal certification process entails a thorough and rigorous review of each product from a life-cycle perspective. It involves reviewing chemical ingredients used in the manufacturing process, as well as visits to raw materials suppliers such as paper mills to ensure manufacturers meet certain environmental standards.

The Daymax® personal organizer and calendar refills were the first JWOD products to meet Green Seal specifications and be awarded the Green Seal. The Daymax system is furnished by the Easter Seal Society of Western Pennsylvania, a NISH-associated nonprofit organization. The Green Seal was also awarded to index sheets manufactured by Easter Seal using the same paper stock. Paper stock used in the production of business cards by the Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Seattle, WA, a NIB-associated nonprofit agency, also met Green Seal standards. The paper contains 50 percent recycled fiber, including 30 percent postconsumer fiber. Additionally, the cards are printed using soy-based inks. Paper hand towels furnished to the government by three other NIB-associated agencies, LC Industries/Signature Works Division in Hazlehurst, MS, as well as LC Industries, Durham, NC and The New Orleans Lighthouse for the Blind, New Orleans, LA, have also received the Green Seal. The paper towels are process chlorine free and contain 100 percent recycled fiber.

Closing the Circle

The California energy crisis has reminded us just how vulnerable we are when the sources that generate power are diminished. As a nation, we need to take responsibility for conserving our natural resources on individual and collective levels. Federal employees, from acquisition professionals to purchase cardholders, have taken a leadership role in demanding, purchasing, using and furnishing EPP and services in the federal workplace. Additionally, private industry has teamed up with the government on the conservation path. The synergy generated through such public-private cooperation will ultimately create a stronger, more productive economy and healthier citizens. In assuming the role of stewards of the environment, we have an opportunity

to leave a legacy of abundant natural resources, bountiful beauty and clean water and air for future generations to come.

ⁱ Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS) Web site, www.fpds.fsa.gov.